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ABSTRACT

Several forms of journal writing, both graded and ungraded and serving different purposes, were used to enhance instruction and outcomes of a basic course in oral communication. In-class journals, written in the first five minutes of class and intended to stimulate thought rather than to practice correct writing, were on a topic assigned by the instructor or suggested by the students. Such journal entries served several functions: getting attention and focusing on content quickly; giving students an opportunity to reflect on course work; providing an introduction to the day's topic; serving as study guides; encouraging interactive learning; motivating students to do reading assignments on time; and offering reticent students a non-threatening option of class participation. These journal entries, while not graded, counted towards class participation. The last five minutes of class time were also used for journal writing, evaluating presentations, summarizing lectures, or answering prepared questions. These journals were collected on a daily basis and fully graded. Writing journals at home provided an opportunity for non-pressured writing, and served as an arena for students to reflect on their reading and classroom experiences. They were graded for information and opinions presented. Student evaluations strongly approved the use of journals. (SR)

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USING JOURNAL WRITING IN THE BASIC SPEECH COURSE

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USING JOURNAL WRITING IN THE BASIC SPEECH COURSE

INTRODUCTION

Several forms of journal writing, graded and ungraded, and serving different purposes, can enhance instruction and outcomes of the basic course in oral communication. Conceptualizing, organizing, expressing, adapting to an audience, thinking and reviewing are basic skills common to both writing and speaking.

Short, frequent, and varied writing assignments can complement speaking assignments and classroom experiential learning. Class journals may take different forms to accomplish several types of goals. Journals may be written in class, either at the beginning or end of the period, or written at home; they may be daily or weekly.

PROCEDURES

I. IN-CLASS JOURNALS: Beginning of class

The instructor writes a topic or question on the blackboard based on the reading assignment for the day, an exercise done in the previous class, a video, etc. Students write a journal entry in a special notebook or pad for five minutes. The instructor circulates, reading the entries, and formulates modifications to the anticipated discussion which will follow. If possible, the instructor should provide some positive remarks or questions to students while they are writing to encourage them to develop their thoughts more fully. During a week of three class periods, the instructor will be able to speak briefly with most students.

The purpose is writing to learn rather than writing to practice correct writing. Students are then invited to share their responses with the class or in small groups.

A variation is to have the students suggest the topic or question on which the class will write. The instructor selects one, or combines elements from several students' suggestions.

These journal entries serve several functions:

1. They begin the class with a formal structure, getting attention quickly, and focusing on the content;
2. They provide students an opportunity to reflect on course work, analyzing, conceptualizing, reviewing, questioning, etc;
3. They provide the introduction to the day's work;
4. They may serve as study guides for exams;
5. The process encourages interactive learning;
6. Students are motivated to come to class prepared to discuss the reading assignment and to do the reading on time;
7. Reticent students are offered opportunities to participate in a non-threatening way.

The journal assignment is listed in the syllabus, and collected several times during the semester. Although not graded, the entries are counted toward class participation. Again, they afford an opportunity for informal feedback.

II. IN-CLASS JOURNALS: End of Class

The last five minutes of the class period are reserved for writing journal entries. These may be generalizations of the strengths and weaknesses observed when the students were presenting formal oral assignments, answers to questions the instructor prepared about the lecture or reading assignment, a summary of the day's lecture or a projection on the work that will follow.

The entry should be one or two paragraphs; it does not replace longer assignments. It is used to confront students and test the realities of the classroom, not simply to ascertain whether the student has read the assignment. Since this type of journal is collected on a daily basis, and fully graded, it creates a dialogue between the student and teacher. Depending on how it is further used, it can stimulate interaction among students. These entries may also be a study guide, and some of the questions can be used on exams.

III. AT-HOME JOURNALS

Writing the journals at home provides an opportunity for non-pressured writing experiences. They are graded for the information and opinions that are included, not downgraded for omissions. They present an opportunity for students to review their expression: thinking, organizing, conceptualizing (not technical corrections.) The students express feelings and opinions about their reading and classroom experiences, reflecting on, not merely repeating content.

STUDENT EVALUATIONS

Mid-semester, students were asked to evaluate the journal assignment. The journal question was: "In what way(s) has writing a journal entry at the beginning of class been helpful or not helpful to you? Should we continue to use the journal?"

The students were almost unanimous in their approval of the assignment and opted to continue its use. The following are samples of their responses:

"it breaks the ice"
"chance to express my opinions"
"...gets the juices flowing. It gets you thinking - writing - learning. I like the journals in the beginning of class."
"I think we should continue to use journal entries because they are a good source of class participation and help us to understand the chapters in the textbook a little better."
...helpful because it has given each student a chance to answer without being wrong because it is our personal opinion."
"...after reading a chapter, it helps us see how much we have understood; helps us to organize our thoughts, express our feelings; sets stage for discussion;"
"...helps me to recall what we've been taught; I remember the topic better in the future."
"...helpful to review material we have discussed or read."
"...relaxes me and helps me to settle down to work; breaks the ice and allows us to share some of our views."
"...continue to use, because reflecting on things is important."
"...helps to get to know myself better."
"...enables us to enhance our communication skills by jotting ideas down before we discuss them; method of organizing the way we feel about things already discussed."
"...it's a good warm-up for class discussion; for focusing attention."
"...gets the ball rolling."
"After answering the journal question I feel I am ready to continue in the class. The journal acts like an appetizer for it gets you ready for the main course, that being the class itself."

Since the responses were not unanimous, the dissent is instructive:

"...it takes time and it isn't necessary."
"I always hated keeping a journal."

"Since it really should be used as notes...better at the end of class as a summary."
"I don't like writing journals, because I don't like to write. It helps me to remember what has been discussed in class, but I don't think it is necessary. I get frustrated; I get writer's block. At the start of class I write down my opinions, and at the end of class I can compare those with my new opinions."
"It was helpful, but I don't like it. It's hard for me to put my ideas on paper. Maybe use them every other day."

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Explain the statement, "You cannot not communicate."
2. What are the components of my self-concept, and what influenced me?
3. How does my self-concept affect my communication behavior?
4. Evaluate the president's speech. (Bush address to Congress.)
5. Explain the statement, "Perception is an internal reality."
6. What objectives, if any, were accomplished by the exercise we did in class? What communication behaviors did you observe?
7. What are the gender differences in the search for intimacy and how do they affect relationships? (Based on a lecture the class attended together.)
8. Describe the observable differences in the communication behavior of the children when they were labelled superior and inferior. (Based on "A Class Divided.")

CONCLUSION

Journal writing is a helpful method to add to the instructor's repertoire. Beginning class with a journal entry is an effective instructional method for a basic course in oral communication. The students' evaluations state that the pedagogical objectives are achieved. After using this assignment for two semesters, this instructor is satisfied that it is a useful and practical way to begin class.